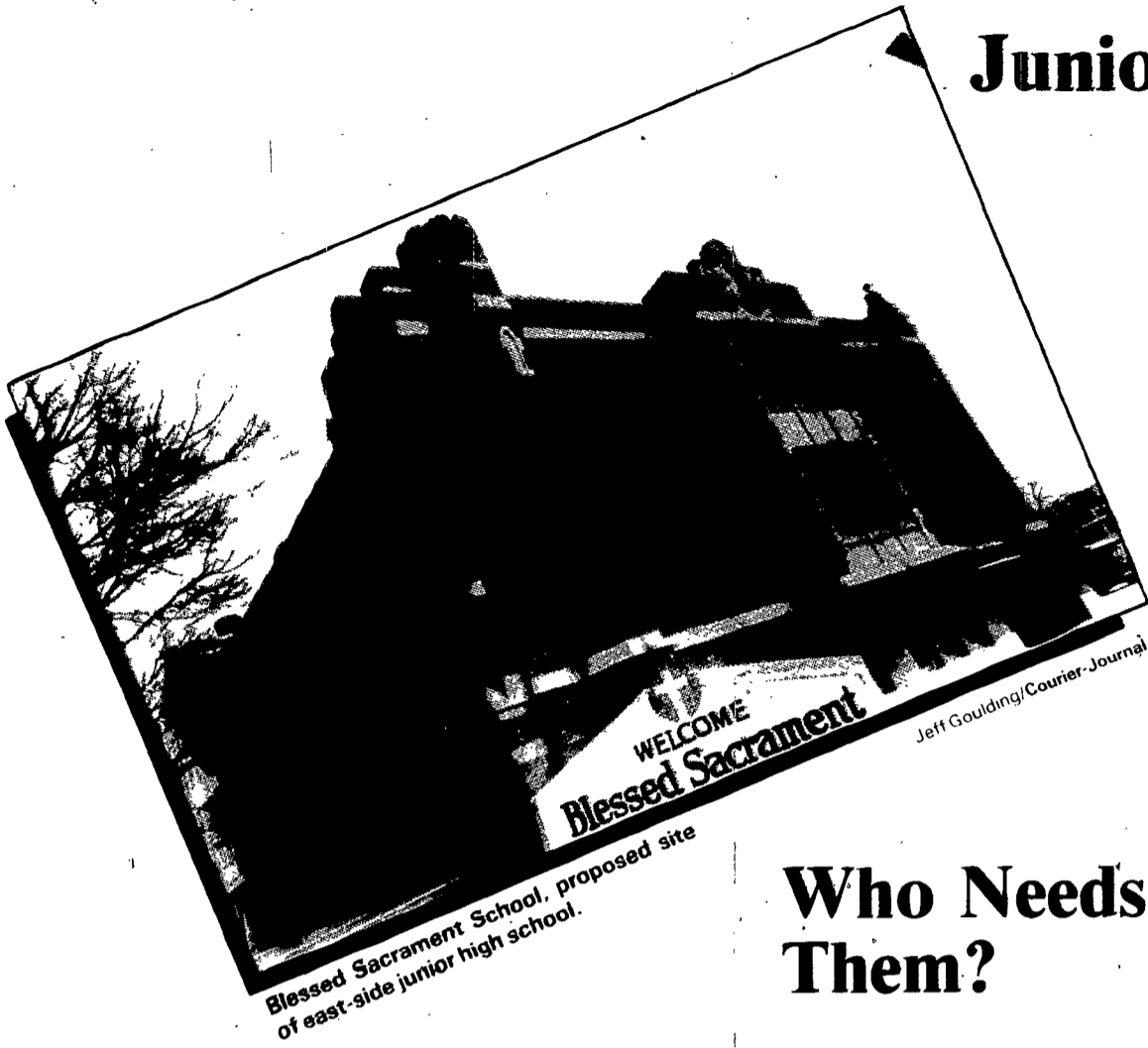
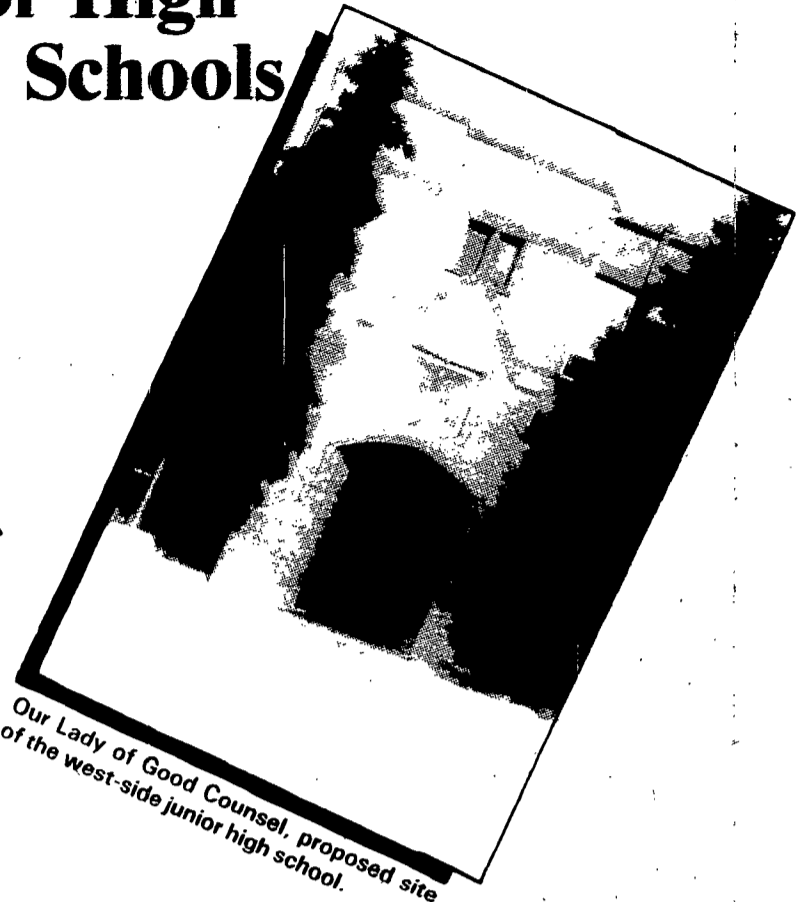


## Regional Junior High Schools



Blessed Sacrament School, proposed site of east-side junior high school.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal



Our Lady of Good Counsel, proposed site of the west-side junior high school.

### Who Needs Them?

By Teresa A. Parsons

Like all the options proposed by the Urban School Study for urban Catholic schools, regional junior high schools have attracted proponents and opponents.

Those who favor them point to such possible advantages as improved curriculum offerings, more opportunities for extracurricular activities, more support among teachers and a better social environment for students, more stable enrollment and more efficient use of finances.

Those who oppose regional junior high schools argue that the kindergarten through grade 8 format need not be sacrificed for any of those reasons.

"I'm going to push good programs whether in kindergarten through grade 8 or junior high," said Evelyn Kirst, diocesan assistant superintendent for curriculum.

But that's all the diocesan office can do — provide curriculum guidelines and urge that they be implemented. Meanwhile, in many schools, staff size and finances are just not sufficient to implement the range of available programs. Regional junior high schools are one of the ways the Urban School Study steering committee sought to provide affordable, quality programs to more Catholic school students.

Regional junior highs are not untested in the diocese. The Chemung County Catholic School System created a regional junior high school at St. Patrick's in Elmira in the 1971-72 school year. St. Patrick's Junior High has since gained wide recognition for excellent programs. A regional junior high school at St. Michael's in Rochester, however, lasted only one year.

The draft of an urban school plan released in January proposed to create two regional junior highs at Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady of Good Counsel schools to handle seventh and eighth grades from several city elementary schools. The final plan calls for more study of the proposal.

Blessed Sacrament has been proposed as the site for a consolidated junior high before — with students from St. Boniface, St. Anne's and St. John the Evangelist on Humboldt Street. Only St. John's approved the consolidation, which was effective in September, 1973.

Since then, Blessed Sacrament has remained primarily a parish-based school. At the same time, the school has developed a specialized approach to junior high education and Blessed Sacrament's principal, Sister Elizabeth Snyder has given a lot of thought to the possible transformation into a regional junior high.

A junior high is not the answer for every school, according to Sister Elizabeth. "But the atmosphere we have been able to create

here is a positive growth experience," she said. "I didn't experience it in the other schools where I taught. They were very good schools, but we didn't have the same opportunities."

The new requirements of the New York State Regents' Action Plan for seventh and eighth grade are one of the primary reasons junior highs are again being considered. Although non-public schools are not specifically required to implement any of the Regents' plan, their students need to be prepared for the Regents' examinations.

Parents in general are concerned about the requirements, but for a variety of reasons. Some worry that unless the Regents' requirements are met, their children will be at a disadvantage if they transfer to public schools. Others fear that in offering the "extras" described in the Regents' Plan, the Catholic schools' excellent record in basic subjects might suffer.

But many of the Regents' requirements are already being met in Catholic schools, according to Kirst. In Blessed Sacrament's case, such "extras" as foreign language instruction, technology, library and research skills, art and music are already integrated with education in basic subjects.

Inter-parish planning groups would examine specific curricula for regional junior high schools according to the urban plan. Kirst said she hopes to begin meeting with the groups in April so that members can spend at least part of the summer researching.

One fact that research will no doubt confirm is that seventh- and eighth-grade subject matter is becoming more and more demanding of teachers as well as students. Junior high teachers should have majors in specific subjects rather than in general education, according to Kirst.

Staff members at Blessed Sacrament agree. "I've taught in a kindergarten through grade 8 school ... and in some subjects, teachers didn't have the expertise to handle it," said Paul Raines, a social studies and religion teacher at Blessed Sacrament. "Here the teachers are teaching what they're qualified to teach."

Along the same lines, a junior high building can become more specialized. At Blessed Sacrament classrooms are designated as language or science labs, and computer, art and music rooms. That allows teachers to be better organized and maintain some continuity from day to day without moving or putting away all their materials after each class. Both teachers and students also appreciate the stimulation that changing classes provides.

Changing classes and allowing students free periods also illustrate the kind of

flexibility that's possible and necessary with a population of older students. The strict discipline for which Catholic schools are renowned has to begin to give way to self-discipline in junior high.

It's a difficult transition. One way Blessed Sacrament has provided support is through guidance counselor Bill Ranney. Ranney doesn't counsel students about career choices necessarily. Instead, he's a friend, motivator, adviser and advocate, and sometime disciplinarian who tries to build rapport with students.

"It doesn't always have to be problems he deals with," Sister Elizabeth said. "Students need someone to have time out with ... He's just always around and he tries to build self-image and confidence."

One group of students particularly lacking confidence are those who need remedial help or have learning disabilities. In the past, Catholic schools have tended not to draw large numbers of such students and, in fact, have been accused of drawing the best students away from public schools. Kirst, however, consigned that presumption to the past. Especially in the city, Catholic schools are drawing more students at a variety of academic levels. Whereas a regional junior high might have a student population large and diverse enough that the school can offer both remediation and advanced placement, many kindergarten through grade 8 schools cannot.

Ideally, a regional junior high school would include four classes at each grade level to support classes geared to slow, fast and middle-track students, Kirst said. But she added that the junior highs proposed for the City of Rochester would most likely begin with two classes of each grade and provide two and a half staff members per grade. Administrators hope that as the schools became established, more students would be drawn to them.

On the other hand, administrators have yet to agree on whether tracking — or placing students in "fast" and "slow" classes — is a healthy strategy. Sister Elizabeth is undecided on that point. She believes tracking can work, but only when teachers are honest and open with students about their need for remediation. "You need the right teacher who can make the work appealing and exciting," she said. Groups that are "tracked" also need to be split up occasionally so that a remedial group doesn't become isolated by always being together.

With small enough class sizes, teachers could accommodate both ends of the academic spectrum in one class. But economically, that's not feasible. Nor has research on the effect of class size yet produced a clear consensus about whether small or relatively large classes are better, according to Kirst.

"It really comes down to finance," she said. "There's a need for a larger program to accommodate both the high- and low-track students."

Parents have mentioned the need for stability at a critical age as one reason the kindergarten through grade 8 format is preferable. But Kirst believes that stability is a "non-issue with students."

"It is an issue with parents," Kirst said. "Youngsters are flexible. They can deal with that."

Sister Elizabeth agreed. "Mobility is part of life today," she explained. "Sometimes children need a change to grow ... When students come in here they're all new. Their world becomes a little bit bigger than the 20 children they went to kindergarten-grade 6 with ... It's good preparation for high school."

One change that Sister Elizabeth and Sister Eileen Daly, principal of Corpus Christi, have foreseen as both a potential problem and a benefit of a regional junior high is assimilating Corpus Christi's mostly black students with Blessed Sacrament's predominantly white population. Already, the principals have arranged visits between teachers from each school. A possible next step would be to bring students from Corpus Christi and Blessed Sacrament together for activities, from sports to school dances and classroom projects. "I think we can break down some of these barriers before they happen," Sister Elizabeth said.

"Children aren't the ones who carry these prejudices," she added.

Two huge question marks in the minds of parents are tuition and transportation — both particulars that Sister Elizabeth and Kirst agreed can't be specified until a plan is adopted. At Blessed Sacrament, students ride the city school buses and tuition is paid directly to the parish to which the family belongs. The parish then pays according to how many students attend the school. The formula in place at Blessed Sacrament/St. John's could be used for any number of participating parishes, Sister Elizabeth explained.

In the final analysis, Blessed Sacrament illustrates that parents, students and teachers can be satisfied with a good school, regardless of the age group it serves.

"I've been in education for 25 years at all kinds of schools," Ranney said. "I have never seen a place with such dedication to excellence for all the kids."

"It doesn't really have anything to do with the number of grades here," he added. "There could be two grades or 32. We're just here to educate children and we're having a good time doing it."